

HAWKING FISH WITH “NEPTUNE” – EXPERIENCES WITH AN OSPREY

by

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Translator’s Note: This lively account reflects post-World War II attitudes towards Ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*) in West Germany. It contains biological information and, most important, it should help those rehabilitation centers that deal with Ospreys. This paper was originally published in *Wild und Hund* 70(23):559-560, 1968.

In the thirties, shortly before my graduation, my grandfather was an official in the Forest Service in Thuringen. We had a number of fish ponds stocked with carp. Ospreys were both resident and breeding nearby. I read in an old book once that this species had been trained for fishing, but nowhere could I find out *how* to do it.

By chance I watched an Osprey fishing. He misjudged his capabilities and, together with the fish, lodged in a large weir from which neither could extricate itself. I hurried over with my net and rescued them from their prison. The fish was already dead, and the Osprey struggled to get out of the net, but could not. I let him thrash about and brought him home and put him in an empty goat shed so that he would quiet down. He flew to the edge of a feed trough, where he sat anxiously.

In order to tame him, or, as falconers say, to “man” him, I used the techniques well described by the old master falconer, R. Waller, for the training of Goshawks and wild-caught falcons, except it was a live *fish*, just caught in the pond, that I held out to him every day. I let him take a full crop. The first day he danced about on a pole, eyed the flopping fish, but did not dare to come nearer. I stood as still as an oil painting. I spoke softly to soothe him, but he did not take the fish, although I stood by him for a half an hour. I did the same the next day. He must have been hungry because he snatched the fish from my hand and retreated along the pole to eat it a little away from me.

In the meantime, I had built a mews with the help of my grandfather, who, however, laughed at me pityingly when I explained what I planned to accomplish with the Osprey. He let me carry on, figuring that I would have to find out for myself. Grandpa felt I should put a hood on the Osprey. I refused, saying that Ospreys do not wear hoods in the wild. Besides Goshawks and Golden Eagles trained for falconry are not hooded. My reasoning was that as Ospreys specialize solely in catching fish, they would not be diverted or made uneasy by other types of quarry while being carried around in the area. I was right. “Neptune,” as I had named him, maintained the bearing of a noble eagle, an eagle who could be disturbed by nothing—nothing but fish.

So it was that Neptune was not hooded. With good food and tender care, the Osprey grew handsome. I weighed him daily; his weight remained between 1.5 and 1.8 kg. This weight and plumage in first-rate condition are essential for successful hunting. (Let it be noted that the “he” was a “she.”)

Next I put jesses on Neptune and tethered her to a bow perch by day on the meadow in front of the shed. The jesses need to be adapted to the particular hunting method of this species. As it always goes into the water feet first, foreign bodies on the tarsi are a detriment. Also one does not have to put bells on an Osprey, as they fill up with water and become useless.

After many attempts to devise jesses that one could release with a single pull, I gave up. In the meantime, Neptune had become so well manned that she remained on the fist without jesses and showed no inclination to regain her freedom. When she was supposed to fly, she flew free from tree to tree—toward the pond—and waited there for me. I had problems training her to the lure. The kind of lures our grandfathers used for Goshawks and falcons did not interest her at all. She plucked off bits of fish fastened to a lure, and that was the end of a kill for her. Finally I got her to understand that she must let her human hunting companion take her *quarry* away from her, but she was allowed to feed to her heart's content on the *lure*. After much pondering I made her a lure using a two-year-old stuffed carp. It left her cold. When I tied bits of fish onto the stuffed carp, she plucked them off and left the lure; sometimes she was off to a tree, and sometimes she came to the fist.

It was clear, and it took me some time to recognize it, that the Osprey had no interest in, and could not react to, anything that crawled on the ground or flew in the air. Her quarry was in the water. As one would release bagged pigeons to Goshawks or falcons, I placed many two-year-old carp in a cask arranged so that I could shove them out and plop them into the pond. After a few practice runs I got the quirks out of this system, and the fish played the game with evident pleasure.

By now I was serious. The cask was set upright in the pond with a release hole just above water level. By means of a rope and pulley attached to a pusher, the fish were shoved out. I stood about ten meters away with Neptune on my fist. I gave my cousin Herbert, who was helping me, the signal. The pusher moved, and with a rush of water the first carp shot out and splashed into the pond. Neptune became alert on my fist and viewed the cask with interest. Soon the second carp shot out. Neptune began to dance, and as the third carp came out of its prison into the pond, the Osprey left the fist, made a short maneuver, and plunged feet first into the water, sending up a good spray above both herself and the fish. After about two seconds she emerged again carrying the fish, already dead as a result of her dagger-sharp talons.

Book-learning had convinced me that the Osprey consumes its quarry on the ground, so I waited for her to carry it somewhere so that I could take it away from her. She failed to oblige me by doing anything of the sort. Instead she circled me a couple of times, called, and then landed on my right shoulder with her prey. This style was dead wrong. I extended my arm, and she stepped onto my fist. Now the "fish lure" played its part. My cousin displayed it to her and simultaneously covered the fish she had just caught. Neptune shook her head, but stepped up onto the lure after all and took the tiny pieces of fish flesh from it while Herbert took the fish from her and let it disappear in the creel.

This first success was simultaneously the first failure: success because Neptune had finally taken quarry, failure because she had retrieved. Birds flown in falconry are not supposed to retrieve. How could I keep her from doing anything so unorthodox? I wished to be correct and to take her quarry from her. I reasoned that Ospreys sometimes eat their quarry on the ground but sometimes carry it to a tree to feast. Suitable perch trees were scarce along the shore; I had become a substitute tree. I recalled that we had once erected a perch tree for an Eagle Owl decoy when we were shooting crows from a blind. I procured an old stub about my size and erected it on the shore.

The following day we tried the “bagged” fish again. Neptune circled me a couple of times with a fish again and then flew to the tree and perched. I rushed over to her and got her quarry away from her as on the previous day.

A few days later—a warm summer day when fish are wont to jump—we went again to the ponds, this time without the cask and “bagged” fish. I wandered along the shore with her. She was scot-free on my fist. Neptune viewed the unrippled water with interest. Suddenly she shifted and began to dance in the typical manner. She shot off, and feet first she plunged into the water. The surface of the water was disturbed for a short time, and then the Osprey emerged with a fish that she had caught in the wild. She gave what seemed to be a triumphant call and perched on “her” tree. I took the fish from her there and let her come to my fist.

Many hunting days followed—rich in experience with Osprey and fish. I can now summarize my observations and experiences as follows:

The Osprey cannot be trained like a falcon or Goshawk. Its quarry is simply fish, and it does not distinguish between species, taking carp, tench (*Tinca vulgaris*), pike, and pike-perch.

A wild-caught Goshawk, on the other hand, does distinguish between quarry species. If it has been entered on (taught to pursue) rabbits, the bird must be reconditioned if one wishes it to take pheasants. The Osprey is carried unhooded as it is not disturbed by flushing quarry, people, or vehicles. One can equip it with normal jesses when carrying it about in the area. If it becomes particularly tame, one does not need jesses as it rides free on the fist or on a perch fastened onto the baggage carrier of a bicycle.

The Osprey does not always take its quarry to the ground to feed upon it; it prefers a tree near the shore. If no such tree is near, it accepts its human hunting companion as a “tree” and perches on his hat or on his shoulder. Therefore the falconer erects an artificial tree near the shore—about the size of a person—and takes the quarry from the Osprey without difficulty. It is best to train the bird by releasing fish for it to catch. The fish are released from a cask into the water of the pond. All other methods of entering Ospreys with lures garnished with feathers or fur are futile as they have no interest in birds or mammals as quarry. A stuffed fish or a fish lure is recommended to get the bird to step onto the fist. After it is well trained, one can take its quarry away without using a fish lure. One covers the fish with one’s gloved hand and pulls it away with the left hand.

The trained Osprey is kept in a mews on a high screen perch just like a Goshawk or falcon. A bow perch and a bath pan should be placed near the mews in the shade. The Osprey likes to bathe more frequently than any other raptor.

It is ecologically interesting that the Osprey is the only (diurnal) raptor that can reverse its outside toe to grasp. It always carries its prey headfirst and never crosswise. In captivity it must be fed fresh fish; these are handed to it whole so that the Osprey can pull them apart itself. It will disgorge the undigestible parts, such as scales and bones, in pellets.

For the most part the Osprey is flown from the fist and returns to the fist with its prey. In other words it “retrieves.” This comes from its habit of consuming food on a high perch where it is safe from herons that often try to chase it away from its prey in the wild. Now and again the Osprey waits on high over the pond and plunges into the water from the air; it always dives feet first.

An Osprey may misjudge the strength of its quarry. Then the falconer must go into the water with his big net and bring back both Osprey and fish if he does not wish to lose his bird. The Osprey cannot remain under water long, or it will drown.

Experiences with nestlings or branchers are not available. It would be harder to train them for hunting. One just cannot follow an Osprey over its fishing territory; instead it must return to the falconer after a successful hunt. This fundamental difference between hawking fish and hawking game justifies carrying. (It is bad form for a falconer to let his bird carry prey.)

The war interrupted my experiments with the Osprey, and after the war I could not resume them again.

One should explain to the owner of a pond and to fishermen that the damage incurred to fish is slight, when only one bird is involved. The situation would be different in the case of a breeding pair, but Ospreys are not known to breed in West Germany. Besides, Ospreys did not invent the tin can—men did. Men hunt to store food and to hoard; Ospreys hunt only for survival. Many a day their crops are empty. Those who view nature only from the standpoint of usefulness and materialism will never grasp the greatness and beauty of creation. They will consider my experiences, and the trouble I took with an Osprey, useless and senseless as they did not result in “production”!

The observations and experiences with the Osprey are experiences in the beauty of nature. Its splendid fishing flights and its steep plunges, with water splashing high, enrich knowledge of nature and teach us to mind the ecological and biological balance and to restore natural conditions where thoughtless and selfish people have damaged them.

The Osprey belongs to the natural landscape as do the fish, the Goshawk, the rabbit, and the fox. Man needs to regulate, where it is advantageous, with consideration of biological forces and with respect for creation, or he will become *primus inter pares* and nothing more.

HAWK MIGRATION ASSOCIATION

The Hawk Migration Association of North America will hold its 1976 Conference at the University of Minnesota, Duluth Campus. The campus is within a ten-minute drive of Hawk Ridge, one of the great hawk migration lookouts. Dates of the conference will be September 2-5. Further details may be obtained from Dr. P.B. Hofslund, Biology Dept. UMD, Duluth, MN 55812.

MALE BLACK SOLITARY EAGLE NEEDED

The Fort Worth Zoo is searching for a male Black Solitary Eagle (*Harpyhaliaetus solitarius*) to be paired with its female Solitary Eagle that nests and lays each spring. If any member of the RRF knows of any Solitary Eagle anywhere in the United States, please contact Ronald Kimble, Supervisor of Birds, Fort Worth Zoo, 2727 Zoological Park Drive, Fort Worth, Texas 76110.